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Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the military, Tatmadaw, gained and maintained the dominant power in the country. Throughout their short history, the Tatmadaw garnered a reputation of human rights violations while battling the country's many ethnic groups in armed struggles. In 2008, Myanmar adopted a new semi-democratic constitution that led to a demonstration of many reforms throughout the country many of which have been prompted by the military leadership. The U.S military should take advantage of the reform and changes in Myanmar to influence the growth of a modern and professional military culture. As the Tatmadaw seeks to develop a professional force within the scope of national political reform there is an opportunity to influence their future military strategies and doctrine, national roles and responsibilities, and leadership education and training which in turn may change their military culture and norms reference human rights. These influences need to come directly through U.S. and Tatmadaw military to military engagements and indirectly through utilizing strategic partners in Southeast Asia such as India, Thailand, Indonesia, or Singapore, ASEAN, strong allies such as Australia and Great Britain, and influential organizations like the European Union.					
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The Tatmadaw and Human Rights: Changing a Military Mindset

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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30 October 2014

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Paper Abstract

Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the military, Tatmadaw, maintained the dominant power in the country. Throughout their short history, the Tatmadaw garnered a reputation of human rights violations while battling the country's many ethnic groups in armed struggles. In 2008, Myanmar adopted a new semi-democratic constitution that led to a demonstration of many reforms throughout the country many of which have been prompted by the military leadership. The U.S military should take advantage of the reform and changes in Myanmar to influence the growth of a modern and professional military culture. As the Tatmadaw seeks to develop a professional force within the scope of national political reform there is an opportunity to influence their future military strategies and doctrine, national roles and responsibilities, and leadership education which in turn may change their military culture and norms reference human rights. These influences need to come directly through U.S. and Tatmadaw military to military engagements and indirectly through utilizing strategic partners in Southeast Asia such as India, Thailand, Indonesia, or Singapore, ASEAN, strong allies such as Australia and Great Britain, and influential organizations like the European Union.

Introduction

Preventing indiscriminate attacks and willful killings of civilians in Myanmar will require a paradigm shift within the military that overturns longstanding practices and deep-seated norms.

-International Crisis Group, *Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks?*

Since Myanmar's independence from Great Britain in 1948, the country's military, Tatmadaw, maintained a consistent position of dominant power in the country.¹ A dominant power used by the military as what they see as the only protectors of the state against internal ethnic conflicts and inept civilian political leaders. From inception, the Tatmadaw fought continual counterinsurgencies against the multitude of disenfranchised Myanmar ethnic groups where their policies led to tactics that garnered a harsh reputation for human rights violations. Additionally, the military eventually took the government over from civilian leaders they deemed were threats to the union. Therefore the Myanmar military developed a military culture focused on nationalism and governance whose main purpose is focused on protecting the state from internal threats.

With the adoption of the new constitution in 2008 and a gradual shift towards democracy, Myanmar is taking measured, positive improvements in the social, economic, and political environments, many of which are supported or spurred on by the Tatmadaw leadership. Along these lines the Tatmadaw is slowly improving the way it deals with ethnic groups, associated ethnic conflicts, and human rights. Ultimately, the Myanmar government needs to make constitutional and other national changes to solve their internal ethnic conflicts leading to overall improved human rights, but, as the most powerful pillar of national governance, the Tatmadaw can assist the process by developing a professional military culture that embraces a change in their role in national sovereignty. As the

Myanmar government continues to work towards refining their democracy and constitution to improve human rights, the United States (U.S) military can influence the Tatmadaw in building a professional military culture by developing modern strategy and doctrine, re-defining national roles and responsibilities, and promoting leadership training and education that will help transform their view of human rights and ultimately gain the trust of the ethnic populations.

Background

The post-independence history of the Myanmar military is deeply intertwined with the governance of Myanmar. The Tatmadaw's direct involvement with governance was hinged to two ideals developed in reaction from perceived threats to national sovereignty - maintaining national unity in a country of numerous, disenfranchised ethnic groups, and a distrust of civilian leadership.² Throughout time Myanmar was continually beset with ethnic strife but the conflicts became more prevalent after independence from Great Britain in 1948.³ Myanmar is a country with roughly 135 different ethnic groups ruled by a majority of ethnic Burman's or Barma's who "constitute nearly 60% of the total population and most of the important positions in politics, education, economics and other spheres."⁴ And since Myanmar's independence the Barma's left ethnic minorities out of the country's governance and political processes, leading to continuous ethnic struggle and armed conflict for autonomy between the numerous disparate ethnic groups and the Tatmadaw.⁵

The ethnic struggles started with the combined failure of the Barma leadership to honor the 1947 Panglong agreement that was supposed to deliver autonomy to the ethnic groups in the frontier regions and the rise of Barma nationalism that did not include the interests of the ethnic groups.⁶ Since then, Myanmar has known decades of armed struggle

between the armed ethnic groups and the government, with short periods of cease fires, without ever approaching reconciliation or agreeable peaceful solutions.⁷ These continual armed conflicts led the Myanmar government to seek mainly military solutions to their policies of forced ethnic assimilation and the protection of the national sovereignty of a “single united nation state.”⁸ Likewise, throughout the conflicts the Tatmadaw used doctrine, policies or tactics that included indiscriminate violence against civilians establishing a long trend of human rights violations and further growing the divide for peaceful negotiations and ethnic national inclusion.⁹

In addition to the ethnic armed threats, the Tatmadaw also saw civilian political leaders as the second internal threat to national unity. Even though the military supported civilian control of the government in the first few decades since independence, ironically, the Tatmadaw never trusted civilian control of the government due to their perceived inability to solve the internal conflicts without threatening the breakup of the union. Over time the Myanmar military developed beliefs that civilian leaders were too corrupt and incompetent to govern and serve the national interests.¹⁰ The Tatmadaw eventually saw themselves as the great protectors of the state not only from internal military threats but from “the folly of politicians” as well.¹¹ Eventually by 1962, the Myanmar military finally adopted the military governmental rule that lasted in various forms until today creating a military culture that combined politics, national governance, and national military defense.¹²

After several unsuccessful attempts for political and economic reform, the Myanmar leadership in 2008 was able to “reactivate its “roadmap to disciplined democracy” by adopting a new constitution and holding elections in 2010 that would bring a reformist government into power.”¹³ Many feel that two factors led the military/political leadership’s

drive for political change- a perceived need for a strategic counterbalance to China (mainly the U.S. and the West) and the deepening economic gap with other countries in the region.¹⁴ Major players in the reform, the Tatmadaw “allowed, supported, and in some cases advocated major reforms – including those that impacted its economic interests.”¹⁵ Some observers think that the Tatmadaw will eventually curb or unhinge the peace process, liberalization of politics, and reforms started through the new constitution and government.¹⁶ Though the military has given up some political power to the civilian government and national impacts on their interests they still remain a powerful political force that maintains autonomy, 25 percent bloc of seats in the legislature, and other important positions in the seats of government perhaps to keep a check on the transition to a civilian government.

In the end it seems, for whatever reason, that a “new generation of leaders in the military and government have pushed the transition [to semi-civilian government] far further and much faster than anyone could have imagined.”¹⁷ The latest experiences so far appear to show a Myanmar military seeking changes in modernization and professionalism which present “new opportunities to reform the institutions and policies that have historically undermined the freedom, security and wellbeing of the people of Myanmar.”¹⁸ The Tatmadaw can create positive changes to its military culture in relation to human rights with possible reform in respects to modernization and professionalism specifically in military strategy and doctrine development.

Professional Military Culture

Military Strategy and Doctrine

Since the day of independence, the Tatmadaw has been involved in restoring and maintaining internal security and suppressing insurgency. It was with this background that the defence policy was formulated.

-Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*

The Myanmar's military strategy that drove policies and doctrine built a military culture prevalent today deeply rooted to the internal threats to national sovereignty since 1948. With primary focus on the internal threats of armed ethnic conflict, the Tatmadaw's defense strategy focused on counter-insurgency leading to doctrine and policies that created a culture in which a disregard for human rights would become the norm to include attacks on and killings of civilians.¹⁹ Since 1948, the Myanmar military went through three phases of doctrine development; first focused on external threats but quickly transitioning to and maintaining an internal threat focus to defend against the country's continual insurgencies.

The Tatmadaw's first doctrine after independence was focused on facing external threats in conventional warfare but was quickly changed in 1962 to internal threats when eclipsed by the ethnic insurgencies as the main threat to the nation.²⁰ The next two phases of doctrine were focused on the insurgent internal threats and bore the policies and tactics that led to a culture of human rights violations. The second phase of doctrine in 1962 shifted to counterinsurgency and a "people's war" concept that led to a strategy called the "four-cuts strategy" which led to cutting the links between insurgents and the ethnic local populations by targeting the civilian population's ability to possibly provide food, money, personnel, or intelligence support to insurgents.²¹ This doctrine and "four cuts" strategy created a military culture that diminished the value of civilians and standardized them as targets.²²

Additionally, the military over time continued to see the need for modernization and professionalism of their force in doctrine, organization, equipment, leadership, and training as it balanced the needs for a conventional force designed against external threats and those forces designed to fight insurgencies.²³ At times the military doctrine and modernization programs seemed at odds but in the end the Tatmadaw transformed a military from a counter-insurgency force into a conventional force.²⁴ By the 1980s the military updated their doctrine a third time to include meeting external threats in line with the growth and modernization of the conventional forces. With the organizational growth the military did not have the financial resources to continue to logistically support the units fighting the ethnic conflicts therefore creating a strategy of self-reliance for those units to sustain themselves.²⁵ This continued the institutionalized culture of abuse and exacerbated the human rights issues as Tatmadaw soldiers continued to conduct “large-scale abuses such as land confiscation, informal taxation, and forced labour.”²⁶ However, in the current political reform environment shaped by the 2008 constitution and the 2010 elections, the Tatmadaw seems to be making a transition, among other things, between how the government is utilizing non-military solutions to the ethnic issues and how it views national security with an external strategy.

While the government is seeking non-military solutions, such as cease fires agreements and political changes, to try and solve the ethnic conflicts, the military can change its strategic focus on external security. In the current context of political solutions to the ethnic conflicts and government reform, the Myanmar military is continuing to modernize and build a professional army including updating their doctrine of which they are in the process of today.²⁷ This modernization also includes focusing on external security and

adjusting how the military operates within the country's internal security framework where the focus of their new doctrine development changes the way the Tatmadaw is viewed by the ethnic groups "from the enemy to a national security force that defends the interests of all Myanmar's peoples."²⁸ But modernization must also include a change in culture and how the Tatmadaw views human rights.

Many pundits argue that any reform that the Tatmadaw executes will be minor as it still view's itself as the protector of the state and unwilling to allow ethnic groups to threaten the union. The Myanmar military will remain a power in the government and in the end will execute operations as necessary when ethnic groups threaten the national sovereignty. Many experts see the recent political reforms and changes "as a sham, arguing that the army is still pulling the strings behind the civilian government."²⁹ Although the military backed reform and even willfully gave up some power, it still maintains enough control to reverse civilian political control if an inadequate government seems to threaten the state.³⁰ It is possible that the military leadership has supported reform to help improve the economy as a regional imperative and possibly personal gain, but still has not done enough to change the military culture that promotes attacks on civilian populations.

As for human rights, so far the "Myanmar military has not formally renounced its counterinsurgency policies, introduced new initiatives to ensure civilian protection, or taken steps to distance itself from the legacy of the Four Cuts doctrine."³¹ One example is the continuation of these policies during the latest heavy fighting in 2011 against Kachins as well as the treatment of Muslim Rohingya's during a period of relative peace negotiated through cease fire agreements. Lastly, some experts do not think that the Myanmar military would

seek cooperation or advice reference military doctrine due to the historical xenophobic nature born from independence and their former reclusive nature.³²

On the other hand, in the last few years the Myanmar government and military demonstrated openness to the west and real political reforms that may lend itself to military engagements in building a modern and professional force. The reasons for reform stem from the need for economic reform and closer ties to the West where the Tatmadaw is seeking strategic ties to the U.S in order to balance those with the power to the north in China.³³ These ties also provide access to western weapon systems, technologies and training that other countries in their region possess; Myanmar also realizes that only true democratic reform, to include human rights, will open those military resources to them.³⁴ The Tatmadaw understands that any economic reform and growth within the region and the West is tied to its overall democratic reform.

As Myanmar continues to seek relationships with the West, the United States may be able to influence the modernization of their external based security strategy and doctrine development directly or indirectly through regional partners, organizations and allies and begin creating the roots of a military culture that values human rights. The U.S. should influence the defense ministers in ASEAN to continue to involve the Myanmar military in programs and exercises to help build the Tatmadaw's regional security partnerships. For example, ASEAN could include or invite Myanmar to participate in ASEAN "Eyes in the sky" missions with Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand to combat piracy and terrorism over the Malacca Strait.³⁵ The U.S. also could continue to invite the Tatmadaw to observe training exercises similar to having them observe the 2013 Cobra Gold exercise with Thailand, the largest U.S. led training exercise in that region.³⁶ Similarly, the U.S. should

influence Australia in allowing Myanmar to observe a Talisman Saber exercise which demonstrates readiness and training within practical and current strategies.³⁷

Additionally, the U.S. military should continue to support allied programs like the United Kingdom's mission in January 2014 where they provided strategy development courses to high ranking officers of the Tatmadaw.³⁸ Participation in these and other exercises, programs, missions, and military-to-military engagements will assist in the Tatmadaw's development of external security based strategy and doctrine. To build on the defense strategy and doctrine development, another linked influence on military culture is a change in how the Tatmadaw leaders see their national roles and responsibilities as a professional armed force during Myanmar's slow transformation towards democracy.

National Roles and Responsibilities

If military professionalism is interpreted in the Huntingtonian sense as the "decisive factor in keeping the soldier out of politics," it is at odds with the characteristics of the Myanmar armed forces or Tatmadaw.

-Muthiah Alagappa, *Military Professionalism in Asia*

Since the first days of independence the Myanmar military cemented its powerful role in the country's governance. They developed a roles and responsibilities military culture based on nationalism with a dual role of political and military leadership which reflects "a "new professionalism" rather than the "old professionalism" of traditional Western Armed Forces."³⁹ The Myanmar military identifies itself as the only national organization capable of keeping the union together whether in governance or in solving the ethnic issues that threaten to divide the country; superior to and protectors from poor civilian political leadership. On the other hand, Western armed force professionalism establishes the military

subordinate to the civilian leadership. Additionally, due to the continual ethnic conflict, their military culture reflects a set of roles and responsibilities mostly focused on defeating internal armed threats and using military means to resolve ethnic conflicts vice other political means. The combination of their political leadership and military means and policies used to suppress ethnic groups generated the numerous human rights violations answerable to no one in Myanmar eventually isolating them from the world. As Myanmar strives to reform they need to re-define the military's national roles and responsibilities closely related to Western military professionalism; subordination to civilian authority, focused on an external threat based national defense, and less involvement in solutions to internal national conflict.

In light of the recent reforms and the gradual changes brought on by the 2008 constitution and 2010 elections, the military seems to be taking measured steps to allowing more civilian control in the government. During the 2014 Armed Forces Day, the commander-in-chief gave a speech where he remarked “the need for “gradual reduction” in the Tatmadaw’s political role as the country “matures in democracy” and he further stated to foreign diplomats “the need to bring the military progressively under civilian control” while the civilian president has given the same messages.⁴⁰

Although currently undergoing doctrinal revisions, the Tatmadaw in the last few years demonstrated a slow move away from dealing with Myanmar internal affairs. The Tatmadaw showed restraint in dealing with ethnic conflicts allowing government to pursue peace processes with 16 armed ethnic groups.⁴¹ The government, as well as the military, “for the first time in four decades has understood that a military solution is not the way to go in solving the ethnic issues.”⁴² Recently the military deferred to the utilization of internal forces, mainly police, in dealing with internal decent or social unrest unless called up by the

government for a national emergency.⁴³ Their adaption to a more subordinate role is also reflected in their other cultural changes such as renouncing the use of forced labor and announcing the return of thousands of confiscated farmland to the original owners.⁴⁴ But in the backdrop of some continued human rights violations some may argue that the Tatmadaw's subtle changes really do not indicate honest efforts.

The history of the Myanmar's role in national politics and their current role under the new constitution leads many observers to believe that they will never abdicate their power and central role in governing the nation. Though the military appears to be yielding some power and position in the government on the path to reform they still have long history acting on the belief that they are the only state organization solely responsible for unifying and protecting the nation.⁴⁵ Further, the Myanmar military leadership demonstrated in the past the inability to compromise and "do not understand the notion of a win-win situation."⁴⁶

The Tatmadaw is demonstrating the willingness for reform along with the democratic reforms of the government and with that, to seemingly build a Western type professional force. According to some observers "these developments present new opportunities to reform the institutions and policies that have historically undermined the freedom, security, and wellbeing of the people of Myanmar."⁴⁷ As long as the Myanmar military continues to show modest efforts in reform, the U.S. should, with other partner militaries, continue to encourage military to military engagements and relationships to reinforce the demonstration of acceptable national roles and responsibilities.

Directly, the U.S. military needs to continue programs that reinforce civil-military education similar to the September 2014 leadership workshop conducted at the Myanmar National Defence College emphasizing the importance and roles of civil-military relations.⁴⁸

Likewise, the U.S. military needs to continue to influence, partner with, and support allies who conduct similar military roles and responsibilities training such as the United Kingdom's engagement focus that includes educating the Tatmadaw on their roles under a civilian controlled democratic government.⁴⁹ Another key influence in the region the U.S. military should utilize is Indonesia who themselves experienced the same transition from military rule to civilian governance. The U.S. could partner with and influence Indonesia-Myanmar engagements to further bolster the Tatmadaw's confidence and understanding of the roles under civilian leadership.⁵⁰ Lastly, some of these U.S. and partner nation military engagements should take the form of leadership education and training opportunities which would reinforce long term changes in the Myanmar military's culture and growth of their modern and professional force.

Leadership Education and Training

The most important essential for building a modern Tatmadaw with high military capability is the [sic] training and education.

-International Human Rights Clinic, *Policy Memorandum: Preventing Indiscriminate Attacks and Willful Killings of Civilians by the Myanmar Military*

In coordination with changes to strategy and doctrine and evolving national roles and responsibilities, training and leadership education will remain a key element in building enduring professional, reform, and cultural changes within the Myanmar military.⁵¹ The Tatmadaw maintains a long history of interest and priority in leadership training and education whether in line with doctrinal changes or the modernization, professionalism, and growth of its force. A continual driver of military education and training is the leadership's

consistent drive to build a strong, professional, and, since two decades ago, modern force; what is unknown to many is if the capabilities match the efforts.⁵²

The Myanmar military's training systems were established right after their independence which include the basic training courses for enlisted and officers leading to the further development of advanced training courses over time in congruent with the Tatmadaw's technological and organizational development.⁵³ Their early focus on and continual growth of training established the priority of training in the Tatmadaw organizational structure and serves as a key to their combat readiness.⁵⁴ Over time the Tatmadaw built an officer leadership education system with a Defense Service Academy officer commissioning source, a Command and Staff College (CSC), and a National Defense College (NDC).

Even though at different levels of quality throughout the years, the military understands the primacy of officer education and training to improve the professionalism of their military and continues to improve on their education and training systems. During the 1980's, concurrent with the growth of the military, the Tatmadaw showed the value of education by establishing new rules: operational commanders must have a Master's Degree from the NDC, for promotion to higher command positions senior commanders should have training school experience, and the rank for commanders of the Command Training Centers was upgraded to brigadier general.⁵⁵

Throughout its short history the Tatmadaw leadership also valued the education and training provided through other nation's systems often taking advantage of them to educate their own and using their model's to enhance the quality of their education systems. In 1953, the Tatmadaw refined their training and education programs after officers attended schools in

the U.S., UK, and Australia centered on the establishment of the Directorate of Military Training (DMT).⁵⁶ Up until the 1990's the Tatmadaw established a long history of sending officers to western foreign schools, specifically Staff Colleges and War Colleges, for education. Due to western sanction in the 1980s, Tatmadaw officers trained in China, India, Pakistan, and Russia and now Chinese trained Tatmadaw officers outnumber the officers trained in the U.S.⁵⁷

The counterarguments for education and training engagements with the Tatmadaw are focused on their continued abuses of human rights and their xenophobic nature. Specifically, the U.S. Congress remains cautious on military engagement mainly due to “fresh reports of ongoing human rights abuses by Myanmar’s military, stories of child soldiers, and alleged ties to North Korea.”⁵⁸ U.S. politicians still fear affects to national moral standing with any perceived military ties with Myanmar while they still exhibit human rights violations or tendencies. Many observers also question if the Myanmar democratic reform movement is real and do not believe the military will eventually give up their political power. Any military to military engagement with the Tatmadaw portrays engagement and partnership with an oppressive military regime and “confers on it an ill-deserved legitimacy.”⁵⁹ Lastly, some Myanmar military leaders exhibit xenophobia of external support which leaves doubt to the sincerity of their engagements.

On the other hand, the Tatmadaw and the military leadership have shown some genuine changes in line with political reform from the constitution in 2008, subtle moves to civilian control, and willingness for western engagement across their elements of national power. In order to continue to recognize the encouraging progress of Myanmar’s reforms and best influence the Tatmadaw, the U.S. should conduct direct and influence indirect

military engagements in leadership training and education with Myanmar as well as in supporting indirect military engagements with Myanmar from close allies like Great Britain and Australia and regional partners like India, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia.⁶⁰

The U.S. military should continue direct education programs such as the Defense Institute of International Legal Studies (DIILS) which executed a two day legal affairs exchange with the Tatmadaw in August 2014.⁶¹ Additionally, the U.S. military can indirectly support the training engagements of India with the Tatmadaw that include Indian training teams as well as a myriad of military courses provided by India's armed forces in Myanmar.⁶² Lastly, it should be a paramount objective of the U.S. military to support the Tatmadaw attendance at International Military Education and Training (IMET) type programs with partner nations that provide leadership education programs at their staff and defense colleges and universities. These education programs provide opportunities to the future and current leaders of the Tatmadaw that may influence their future strategy and doctrine development, understanding of national roles and responsibilities and ultimately changes to a modern and professional military culture.

Conclusion

The question then, for the United States, is how to best positively influence the Tatmadaw to assist in modernization, respect for human rights, rule of law, and civilian control of the military.

-Ravi Balaram, *Considering International Military Education and Training in Myanmar?*

While the Myanmar government continues to work towards refining their democracy the specter of the powerful Tatmadaw is historically hanging over the skepticism of the population. The Tatmadaw's harsh human rights reputation in combating Myanmar's ethnic groups and penchant for political rule leaves many in and out of Myanmar skeptical of democratic reform. Along with the democratic changes, the Tatmadaw is also slowly making positive changes; improving the way they deal with ethnic groups, the ethnic conflicts, and view of human rights as well as re-adjusting their rule in relation to civilian control. The Tatmadaw's changes under the democratic reform seem genuine in order to help Myanmar security by building its economy through demonstrating reform to attract western support. The Myanmar military's biggest internal struggle will be developing a professional military culture that embraces a change in their role in national sovereignty and view of human rights. In this light, it is important that the U.S military influence the Tatmadaw in building a professional military culture by developing modern strategy and doctrine, re-defining national roles and responsibilities, and promoting leadership training and education that will help transform their view of human rights and ultimately gain the trust of the ethnic populations.

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- ⁴² Chaturvedi, "Myanmar's Ethnic Divide," 9.
- ⁴³ International Crisis Group, "Update Briefing," 13.

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- ⁴⁵ Jagan, "Myanmar's Military Mindset," 222.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 223.
- ⁴⁷ International Human Rights Clinic, Human Rights at Harvard Law School, "Policy Memorandum", 1.
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- ⁵² Than, "From Burma: The 'New Professionalism'", 170.
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- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 137.
- ⁵⁷ Lynn Kuok, *Promoting Peace in Myanmar: US Interest and Roles* (Google Books, 2014), Executive Summary, <http://books.google.com/books?id=mqaSAwAAQBAJ>.
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